



## **Frequently Asked Questions on Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed Sea Turtle and Smalltooth Sawfish Release Protocol for Commercial and For-hire Permitted Gulf of Mexico Reef Fish and South Atlantic Snapper Grouper Vessels**

**November 2013**

ESA-listed sea turtles and smalltooth sawfish can be injured or killed as a result of being mishandled when caught. NOAA Fisheries' Southeast Regional Office has identified ways to reduce the stress for hook and line caught and released sea turtles and smalltooth sawfish. These measures, if followed, can increase the chance of survival for these species.

### **Who needs sea turtle release gear onboard their vessel?**

- Turtle release gear is required on all:
  - Permitted commercial and for-hire Gulf of Mexico reef fish vessels.
  - Permitted commercial and for-hire South Atlantic Snapper Grouper vessels.
  - Permitted commercial South Atlantic Dolphin and Wahoo vessels with longlines onboard.

### **Are the regulations the same for the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Regions?**

- Yes. The regulations are the same.
- The regulations can be found at [50 CFR part 622](#).

**Are there other hook-and-line fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Regions that also have sea turtle requirements?**

- Yes. The Highly Migratory Species (tunas, billfish, and sharks) and commercial South Atlantic Dolphin and Wahoo fisheries.
- Although many regulations are the same, there are some differences.
- For more information on Highly Migratory Species regulations, see [http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/hmsdocument\\_files/protected\\_species.htm](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/hmsdocument_files/protected_species.htm).
- Requirements for permitted commercial South Atlantic Dolphin and Wahoo vessels with longlines onboard can be found at [50 CFR part 622](#).

**What does the ESA-listed sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish release protocol require for the reef fish and snapper grouper fisheries?**

- Vessels with commercial and for-hire reef fish and snapper grouper permits are required to have the proper equipment and protocols onboard.
- The protocol must be posted at all times inside the wheelhouse, or in an easily viewable area if the vessel has no wheelhouse.

**What specific release gears are required for permitted vessels in the Gulf of Mexico reef fish and South Atlantic snapper grouper fisheries?**

- A permitted vessel with a freeboard height of four feet or less must have on board a:
  - Dipnet
  - Short handled dehooker for ingested hooks\*
  - Short-handled dehooker for external hooks\*
  - Long-nose or needle-nose pliers
  - Bolt cutters
  - Monofilament line cutters
  - At least two types of mouth openers/mouth gags.
- A permitted vessel with a freeboard height of greater than four feet must have on board a:
  - Dipnet
  - Long-handled line clipper
  - Short-handled\* and a long-handled dehookers
  - Long-nose or needle-nose pliers
  - Bolt cutters
  - Monofilament line cutters
  - At least two types of mouth openers/mouth gags.
- All vessels, regardless of freeboard, also need an auto tire or any other comparable, cushioned, elevated surface that allows boated sea turtles to be immobilized as an alternatives to tires for cushioned surfaces as specified in as specified in § 635.21(c)(5)(i)(F). This includes life rings, seat cushions, life jackets, and life vests.

\*Only one short-handled dehooker is required onboard if the approved short-handled dehooker is designed to remove both ingested and external hooks

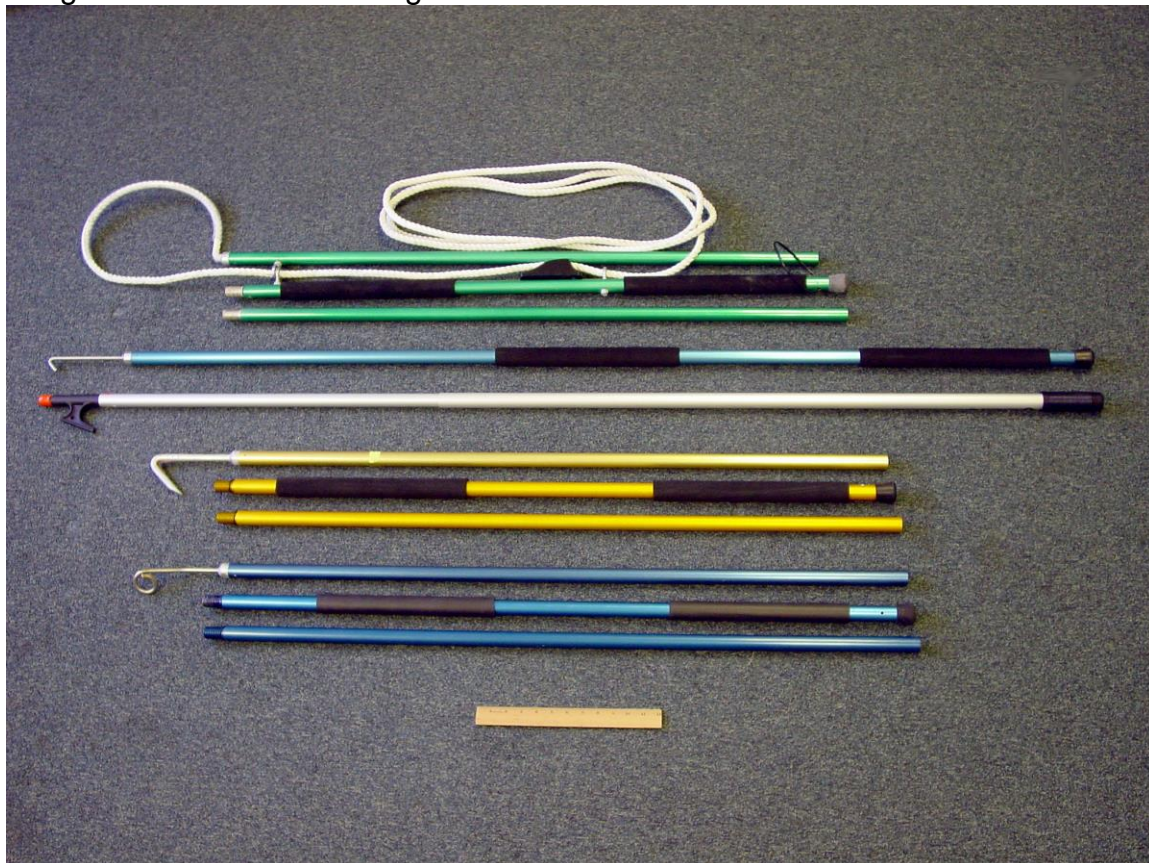
### How do I measure the freeboard to tell if it is greater or less than four feet?

- Freeboard is defined as the working distance between the top rail of the gunwale to the water's surface, and will vary based on the vessel design.

### How much will this gear cost and where can I get it?

- The total cost for release gear for a vessel is estimated to cost between \$267 and \$459.
- These costs may be less for some vessels because some gear may already be onboard. For example, life rings and life vests are already required items for vessels.
- Many of the gears may be fabricated to reduce costs. Instructions for making the gear can be found in the appendices of the "[Careful Release Protocols for Sea Turtle Release with Minimal Injury](#)."
- Descriptions of turtle release gear and a list of NOAA Fisheries-approved gear can be found in the final rule implementing sea turtle bycatch and bycatch mortality mitigation measures for Atlantic pelagic longline vessels (69 FR 40734).

### Long-handled turtle release gear



### **How do I release a sea turtle that is hooked or entangled with my gear?**

- Vessels subject to these sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish release protocols must possess and the crew must use approved sea turtle handling and release gear in compliance with NOAA Fisheries careful release protocols.
- The required handling and release gear are fully described in a document entitled "[Careful Release Protocols for Sea Turtle Release with Minimal Injury](#)."
- There must be sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish handling and release guidelines (provided by NOAA Fisheries) posted inside the wheelhouse or in an easily viewable area if the vessel has no wheelhouse.

### **When should I boat a sea turtle?**

- A sea turtle should not be boated if it is too large to safely be brought onto the vessel, or if sea conditions prevent the turtle from being safely boated.
- Turtles should be boated using a NOAA Fisheries approved dipnet and not pulled into the vessel using the line the turtle has been caught with.
- Pulling on the line could cause serious injury to the turtle, particularly if the turtle has swallowed the hook.
- Handling the turtle once boated should follow procedures provided in the document "[Careful Release Protocols for Sea Turtle Release with Minimal Injury](#)."

### **What do I do if I encounter a dead sea turtle in my gear?**

- If a sea turtle dies from gear interaction, the animal should be released or removed from the gear as if it were alive.
- The sea turtle should not be kept onboard.

### **What if I catch a smalltooth sawfish?**

- Smalltooth sawfish should be released by keeping the fish in the water and cutting the line as close to the hook as possible.
- If it can be done safely, untangle the line if it is wrapped around the saw.
- Do not handle the animal or attempt to remove any hooks on the saw, except for with a long-handled dehooker.

### **Where can I find out more about how these regulations were developed and the rationale behind them?**

- The need for regulations is often identified in biological opinions for different fisheries conducted by NOAA Fisheries Protected Resources Division.
- Southeast region biological opinions can be viewed at [http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/protected\\_resources/section\\_7/freq\\_biop/index.html](http://sero.nmfs.noaa.gov/protected_resources/section_7/freq_biop/index.html).
- For the Gulf of Mexico, sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish regulations were developed in Amendment 18A to the Fishery Management Plan for the Reef Fish Resources in the Gulf of Mexico and can be viewed on the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's Web site ([www.gulfcouncil.org](http://www.gulfcouncil.org)).
- For the South Atlantic, sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish regulations were developed in Amendments 15B and 23 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic Region and can be viewed on the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's Web site (<http://safmc.net>).

**Who do I contact to get more information on sea turtle and smalltooth sawfish release protocols?**

- Contact the Protected Resources Division or the Sustainable Fisheries Division of the Southeast Regional Office, St. Petersburg, Florida.
  - Protected Resources Division
    - Phone: (727) 824-5212
    - Fax: (727) 824-5309
  - Sustainable Fisheries Division
    - Phone: (727) 824-5305
    - Fax: (727) 824-5308